

## MIA : Early American Marxism : Foreign Language Federations introduction page

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# Foreign Language Federations (1890s — 1930)

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### What Were Foreign Language Federations?

The history of early American radicalism is difficult to understand without grasping the institution of “Language Federations” — originally autonomous organizations of immigrants sharing a common mother tongue. The radical Language Federations saw themselves as working class organizations and espoused various visions of socialism. To this end, the Federations began to affiliate with various socialist political parties — collecting national party dues as part of their own organizational dues. Over time, a great deal of tension developed between the decentralized federal structure implicit in various parallel language groups and the desire of some for a unitary, centralized, and disciplined organizational structure. This tension was accentuated the fact that the Language Federations comprised a major part of all three of the primary American “Old Left” organizations in this period — Socialist Labor Party, Socialist Party, and Communist Party. Internal change within each of these groups came gradually, the result of multi-sided political struggle *within* the organization.

Each Language Federation had its own unique origin and path of development. In general, the Language Federations were not artificial creations of central party authorities but rather developed and grew spontaneously “from below.” Autonomous local groups “federated” with one another before the organization affiliated itself with a particular national socialist organization. Due to their decentralized origins, splits and deaffiliations were a common part of the organizational landscape.

In addition to their political goals, the Language Federations also served a social function as well, being gathering places for discussion about matters of common interest. Many groups owned or operated their own halls, where periodic dances and social gatherings were held; others maintained libraries and conducted general education programs.

Very little serious work has been done on the history of the radical Foreign Language Federations. Certainly this web page is a work in progress — scholars with specific knowledge about the history of particular language groups are encouraged to get in touch: [MutantPop@aol.com](mailto:MutantPop@aol.com)